

Trinity College Trinity College Digital Repository

Senior Theses and Projects

Student Works

Spring 2013

Homosexuality and the Bible: A Reconciliation

Emma Belluomo

Trinity College, emma.belluomo@trincoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Belluomo, Emma, "Homosexuality and the Bible: A Reconciliation". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2013.
Trinity College Digital Repository, <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/276>

Introduction: What does the Bible Say about Homosexuality, and why is it Important?

For centuries, the Bible has been used as a source of authority on a range of controversial issues, informing Christian perspectives on everything from the legality of slavery to abortion. In recent years, the issue of homosexuality has been extremely contentious in the Christian community, with many arguing a definitively negative position towards the rights of homosexuals from a basis of a few biblical passages. The question of whether or not homosexuality can be reconciled with the bible and the Christian perspective has taken center stage in recent years, with opponents vehemently citing the Bible as having a final word on the subject. According to a recent USA Today/Gallup poll of November 26th-29th, 2012, religious beliefs and the Bible are the reasons most often cited for opposition to the issue of gay marriage. Of those who were in opposition, when asked the open-ended question “What are some of the reasons you oppose legal same-sex marriages?” forty-seven percent responded that their basis was religious beliefs or the Bible. (Nazworth, 1) As recently as December 7th, 2012, the Supreme Court announced that it would hear two constitutional challenges to state and federal law regarding the issue of gay marriage, one that challenges the Defense of Marriage Act (denial of federal benefits to same-sex couples legally married in their own state) and one that challenges California’s Proposition 8 (denial of same-sex marriage rights previously approved in state courts). The Court expects a ruling by the early summer and will effectively decide the issue of homosexual rights in America, raising the stakes for homosexual Christians. (Mears, 1) The decision to affirm or deny rights of homosexuals to marry will be historic and serves to change the view of marriage for many Americans, making the question of the Bible’s position on the issue an extremely relevant one.

Because of the prevalence of the Bible as a source of authority and its influential role in deciding the issue for many Christians, the mission to identify what exactly the text says about the issue of homosexual behavior is of paramount importance. One important distinction must be made before

looking at the text itself. Gerard Loughlin cites the invention of the term 'homosexual' in 1869 by Karl Maria Kertbeny, the first person to use the word in print, and states "It is important to note the late date...but even more important to note that the settling of its meaning, and its widespread adoption in the twentieth century, marked a new way of thinking of human identity in terms of 'sexuality'."

(Loughlin, 87) The significance of this citation is the fact that until the late 19th century, people did not identify themselves in terms of their sexuality, which means that the writers of these controversial biblical texts were not treating the issue of a homosexual identity as such. Instead, these texts focus strictly on the physical acts of homosexual behavior, and so essentially they do not treat the contemporary issue of what it means for a Christian to have a homosexual orientation. One comes to realize that the references to homosexual behavior are ambiguous at best, and most often are used as part of a greater rhetorical argument rather than focusing on the morality of homosexual behavior directly. The question becomes what exactly biblical authors are saying in the few passages that do reference same-sex practices, and how contemporary Christians are to view these statements in light of a changing cultural context and with the influence of a Christian values system.

Chapter 1: Context of the Holiness Code and the Difficulties Presented by the Text

Any attempt to gain understanding as to what biblical authors believed about homoerotic behaviors, homosexuality as an identity or societal gender norms must start with Leviticus. The set of laws laid down in these passages acts as a basis for the identity of Israel as well its social and moral norms since it was through these ritualistic practices that their covenant with God was affirmed. For the authors of Leviticus, its laws – the Holiness Code in particular – would be fundamental in shaping the Israelite identity based on notions of purity and distinction from other pagan cultures. As the Bible evolved, Leviticus was continually drawn on for insight into this fundamental characterization of the Israelites and led later biblical stories to become informed by its principles, to the point where even St. Paul's epistles draw on his distinctly Jewish background and knowledge of these texts. In addition to its role in characterizing the Israelites, Leviticus is also significant as a source for Judeo-Christian attitudes towards homosexual behavior. Most of what is well known about biblical notions of homosexual behavior stems first from Leviticus 17-25, despite other more positive depictions of homoerotic behavior in the Hebrew Bible such as that of the friendship between David and Johnathan. (Nissinen, 53-55) Similar to the deep compatibility shared between ancient equals like Achilles and Patroclus or Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the strong connection between David and Johnathan contains a positive emphasis that is often overlooked in favor of the few negative passages related to homoeroticism in Leviticus. To understand how the Holiness Code led to negative ideas about homoerotic behaviors, it is necessary to explore the Israelite concern for purity and separation from other pagan cultures. With a greater understanding of Leviticus' laws concerning homoeroticism, the historical context of gender roles and rhetorical strategy involved in creating Israel's identity, it becomes possible to begin to reconcile texts that appear to be wholeheartedly judgmental of homosexuality with Christianity.

Leviticus 17-25 is presented as a continuation of Moses' giving of the law to the Israelites,

which he began in Exodus. If we consider Leviticus as such a continuation, these laws function to validate the existence of the Israelites as God's chosen people, for by observing these laws the holy name of God is sanctified through them. While Exodus had previously detailed rules for situations the Israelites would encounter in daily life, such as buying and selling goods, the main concern of the Holiness Code is ritual – special events like sacrifices and holy days are regulated in detail, all commands which demonstrate the importance of purity in these ceremonial observances above all. Baruch J. Schwartz attributes most of Leviticus to the Priestly Source, which is characterized by a concern for purity and ritual throughout the Hebrew Bible. Embedded within it is the Holiness Code source, or H, which appears in Leviticus 17-25 and fits directly with the holy aspect of these laws. In addition to governing how special ceremonies must be performed in order to keep a standard of holy purity, the Holiness Code also describes various kinds of behavior and actions that can make a person unclean, regulating everything from what can be eaten to sexual activity. Transgressions of these prohibitions result in the necessity of ritual cleansing, and in some cases expulsion from the Jewish community. These laws were most likely written by priests with varying interests, compiled circa the 6th or 7th centuries BCE. (Schwartz, 205) The text reflects an anxiety to maintain a sense of community among the Israelites after their exile from Egypt and gain an identity that will define them as a people for the centuries to come through the concern for morality. Marti Nissinen writes “The basic ideology of the Holiness Code centers on cultic purity, guaranteed by separation from other nations.” (Nissinen, 42) This anxiety explains the narratives that are interspersed between the ritualistic commands emphasizing the Israelites' role as God's chosen people, a literary device which functions to stress the severity of distinction between the Jews and others. As the Israelites were a newly formed society struggling to define their identity after Exodus, their goal became to identify themselves through a radical separation from other cultures, and so the language of Leviticus attempts to create a clear distinction between the Israelites and others by emphasizing a need for purity.

In order to highlight the importance of the Israelite identity, the harsh punishment for failing to observe the Holiness Code is always defined as a radical expulsion from the group of chosen people. A strong anxiety to remain a part of the community is clearly evident as the Israelites came to define themselves by the closeness of their society. A recurring motif in the passages is that one who fails to adhere to these codes will be “cut off from his people,” evoking the covenant God has made with Israel – the only way to maintain the special relationship between God and his people is to keep it holy and pure through ritual. As Nissinen states “Things that shook the internal peace of the community and the coherence of its basic structures...were hazardous to a society that had to struggle constantly for its very existence.” (Nissinen, 42) Failure to follow the law of the covenant is therefore not simply a violation of this holy relationship but affects the whole realm of the universe and disrupts the natural order of things. Leviticus 17 begins to develop this theme through its description of the appropriate slaughter of animals, in which it is stated that whoever kills a sacrificial animal outside of the sanctuary is guilty of murder - “He has shed blood, and he shall be cut off from the people.” (Leviticus 17:4) The capital punishment for such an offense is stated simply, but with emphasis – this person is cut off from society and will never again be considered one of God's chosen people. To an Israelite living during the time of recent exile, such a threat of excommunication would hold serious weight. The expulsion motif continues with the description of dietary prohibitions, in which it is written “If anyone of the house of Israel...partakes of any blood, I will set my face against that person who partakes of the blood, and will cut him off from among his kin.” (Leviticus 17:10) According to the authors of the code, blood was considered the life force of an animal and so to eat meat that had not been properly purified negatively affected the Israelite relationship with God. To conclude Leviticus 17, the biblical author reaffirms the necessity of eating purely, in this case regarding animals captured from a hunt - “He shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth...its blood is its life. Therefore I say to the Israelite people: You shall not partake of the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Any-one who partakes of it shall be cut off.” (Leviticus 17:13-14) This final emphatic declaration not only repeats the cutting off motif but

does so in ritualistic language that describes the purification process, in which pouring the blood of a deceased animal on the ground essentially restores its life blood to the earth and its creator. The language of this declaration reinforces the strength of God's covenant with Israel and the repercussions of breaking the law through the emphasis that the lawbreaker will be cut off from the people, as well as illustrating the concern for ritual in the Holiness Code. The necessity of keeping God's covenant by following these rules for a pure relationship with him becomes evident in the context of a people struggling to create and maintain a tight-knit community.

The Israelites' choice to define themselves by their purity reflects itself throughout the Holiness Code, but the comparison to other nations comes into play specifically in Leviticus 18, in which it is stated "You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you." (Leviticus 18:3) Prior to a list of prohibitions regulating sexual activity, the narrative introduces a distinction between the Israelites and other cultures and thus implies that the Egyptians and Canaanites are sexually impure. Nissinen states "The prohibition of sexual contact between males in the Holiness Code...is done in a context of a polemic against a non-Israelite cult." (Nissinen, 44) The significance of mentioning the supposed immorality of these other nations is to remind the Israelites that if they disregard these regulations, they too will be cast aside as the Egyptians and Canaanites were. Immediately following the mention of Egypt and Canaan are laws prohibiting incest, promiscuity and other impure sexual unions, implying these other cultures are guilty of this kind of licentious behavior and defining them as examples of immorality. In this cultural context, these pagan nations were viewed as sexually licentious and perverted, although as Schwartz points out there is little evidence from their literature to suggest the truth of this – sources from these areas show their views on immoral sexual behavior were very close to that of the Israelites. Martha Roth affirms this point in her collection of laws from Asia Minor, specifically with the example of the Babylonian law on adultery which states "If that woman does not keep herself chaste but enters

another's house, they shall charge and convict that woman and cast her into the water.” (Laws of Hammurabi, 133b) The Laws of Hammurabi are a large collection of ancient Mesopotamian laws compiled from the end of Babylonian king Hammurabi circa 1750 BCE. Known to scholars by manuscripts recopied over the centuries, this the largest and most cohesively organized set of laws from the Mesopotamian world. (Roth, 71) This collection of laws deals with every day situations faced by citizens and contains resolutions for many problems, including issues related to adultery which do not suggest a licentious attitude. Instead of the sexually impious attitude authors of the Holiness Code suggested of these foreign nations, the law contains a moral system extremely similar to that of Leviticus, reinforcing the idea that biblical authors were attempting to give Israel an identity of otherness as a result of their covenant with God. The fact that Egypt and Canaan were not as depraved as Leviticus makes them out to be is irrelevant – the significance lies in the author's choice to have a derogatory example made of another culture. Anxieties about the national identity of Israel led biblical authors to characterize non-Jewish cultures as sexually licentious and immoral, strengthening the necessity of the Jewish people to maintain their purity in comparison and suggesting that refraining from forbidden sexual practices is the key to their survival.

Originally intended to distinguish the Jewish people from other cultures, the Holiness codes cover regulations that keep the Jews “pure” - everything from sexual relations to what can be eaten. The question of historical context becomes critical when one looks to the passages in Leviticus concerned with sexual activity. Leviticus describes various prohibited sexual behavior, from incest to adultery. Finally, in Leviticus 18, it is stated “Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman, it is an abhorrence.” (Leviticus 18:22) The position on homosexual acts appears clear when Leviticus continues “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.” (Leviticus 20:13) Viewing these statements in light of cultural context is paramount to our understanding of biblical representation of homosexuality – biblical culture

lacked a concept of homosexuality as a lifestyle or personal orientation, but saw it strictly as a violent sexual act of force meant to cause humiliation. As Robin Scroggs writes, “The discussion is entirely directed toward the sexual act and its culpability. Nothing is ever said about any other possible dimension...one would assume a homosexual encounter to be only for purposes of sexual gratification.” (Scroggs, 84) The judgment of biblical authors is towards a physical act of violent lust and lacks a notion of any connection beyond the sexual encounter. In his discussion on ancient Near East culture, Nissinen writes “Social identity in an ancient Israelite community did not proceed from the perspective of fulfillment of one's individual rights or preferences but from that of the protection of society...Sexual activity had to be regulated so as to strengthen the identity of society...This necessitated taboo-protected gender roles...the transgression of which was perceived as fatal.” (Nissinen, 42) The phrase “as with a woman” appears in both Leviticus 18 and 20, signifying that a homosexual act puts one of the men in the position of the woman in a negative way. Traditional gender roles defined the male sexual partner as active and the female as passive, a relationship which in the biblical tradition would be perverted by a homosexual act – two men would mean one would have to assume the passive role. Nissinen describes “The strategy of postexilic Israelites to maintain their distinct identity by...separating from others strengthened the already existing taboos and social standards regarding sexual behavior and gender roles.” (Nissinen, 44) In ancient Near East society, masculinity was a value that equated the highest honor and any undermining of this would have been shameful – a sexual act that puts the male in the passive position would dishonor the individual and be considered impure. Frank Kirkpatrick writes, “In the context of maintaining ritual purity and the separation of ‘kinds’, men belonged to one category and women another. To mix them was a violation of purity separation...men who act like women are violating their category and attempting to mix what should not be mixed.” (Kirkpatrick, 155) The male embodiment of the female in such a way improperly mixes two categories which should be separated, just as a man lying with an animal or his father’s wife constitutes the same kind of impure crossing of categorical lines. Nissinen elaborates “Like castration or cross-dressing, male anal intercourse

manifested a forbidden mixture, a mixture of gender roles which, according to the theology of the Holiness Code, was considered...a transgression of boundaries that constituted a threat to the purity of the land.” (Nissinen, 44) Two males committing such an act was a threat to the patriarchal structure governing society as well as a subversion of the traditionally normal male and female, active and passive sexual dynamic. In order to understand the motivations for Leviticus’ condemnation of same sex acts, it is necessary to redefine the concept of homosexuality from an ancient Near Eastern perspective, in which biblical authors could never have conceived it as a personal orientation or expression of love.

While the statements relevant to homosexuality in Leviticus are highly negative in their denouncement of same sex relations, looking at these condemnations in a cultural context which had no conception of homosexual love requires a reinterpretation of these codes. Rather than viewing homosexual activity as an expression of love or personal identity, the audience of Leviticus understood homosexual practices solely as a derogatory act of rape that was practiced to humiliate and undermine men. In a cultural context which understood homosexual practice as an act of violent rape against another man, in which the result was a humiliating undermining of patriarchal masculinity, the law cannot be applied to justify or condemn a contemporary view of homosexual love. In addition to the difficulty evident in taking statements in Leviticus relating to homosexuality out of context, many other condemnations from the Holiness Code are no longer closely followed – for example, banning women who are menstruating from attending the temple because they are unclean (Leviticus 15:19, “When a woman has...blood from her body, she shall remain in her impurity seven days”), or wearing clothes made of different kinds of thread (Leviticus 19:19, “You shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material”). While the statements from the Holiness Code are often cited as a clear objection to homosexual relations, Leviticus’ content exemplifies how the laws of the Bible are subject to change over time and often necessitate a reinterpretation. Several aspects of the Holiness Code are unusual. For

example, “If a man insults his father or mother, he shall be put to death” (Leviticus 20:9) seems to consist of unusually harsh punishment. With other laws, it’s unclear how exactly they are to be interpreted, such as the Sabbath “On the seventh day... You shall do no work.” (Leviticus 23:3) What constitutes work in this case? If one is to take all these laws to their logical conclusion, they would be impossible to follow faithfully. Today, most Jews are not concerned with wearing clothing woven with two kinds of fabrics – does this mean they are not in a right relationship with God? Views on appropriate punishment for violating certain codes have also clearly changed over time, with Leviticus 20:9 being the most obvious example – it is incredibly hard to imagine someone being put to death for insulting their parents today. If the moral laws and punishments of the Bible are so clearly subject to change, the condemnation of homosexual acts in Leviticus may not carry the same weight as they once did, since other laws of Leviticus seem to have been forgotten as legally binding. Kirkpatrick states “Scripture alone cannot decide what is abiding and what is transitory in its depiction of living in relation to God... Those who might argue that... some parts of Scripture are more authoritative than authors... are recognizing that Scripture does not always interpret itself.” (Kirkpatrick, 153) It has been established that the Holiness Code is not an attack on homosexuality as such, nor is it the only crime punishable by death, and so one cannot single homosexuality out as the chief issue of Leviticus while neglecting the validity of other questionable laws. Realizing the necessity to contextualize biblical passages allows for the understanding of the biblical authors motivations, which were based on struggling to identify the Israelite culture as radically from its pagan neighbors as well as maintain gender norms in a patriarchal society. The negative statements made against homoerotic behavior come from a place of ignorance about what it means to identify as a homosexual and speak strictly of physical sex acts.

Recognizing the power of the Holiness Code as an influence for the New Testament, it becomes possible to understand later Biblical texts which base certain ideas about homosexuality on the laws of

Leviticus and are similarly motivated by its concerns for gender and purity. A separation between different kinds in order to maintain purity was clearly valued in Israelite society in order to keep a right relationship with the God, reflecting that the Lord's covenant was based on a special difference between his people and their pagan neighbors. The importance of maintaining this righteousness in the name of God becomes significant in looking at Genesis 19, a story cited throughout history as a hard judgment against homosexuality. If Sodom and Gomorrah is the story of a city condemned because of its lack of righteousness, an investigation into what exactly the sin of Sodom was in relation to the concerns of Leviticus is necessary, and eventually it becomes clear that it was not homosexuality as such that would be the city's downfall, but a break in the covenant through immoral and xenophobic behavior.

Chapter 2: Rectifying the Misinterpretation of Genesis 18-19 and Judges 19

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is famous for being a cautionary tale to the righteous, a notoriety that presents a paradox to the reader – one of the most well-known biblical stories is simultaneously one of the most misunderstood. The common misconception regarding the sin of Sodom is that the Lord decimated the city on account of rampant homosexual behavior among its residents, an idea one can see as most basically evident from the common use of the word “sodomy” to describe anal rape. John J. McNeil summarizes “People universally believed on what they held to be excellent authority that homosexual practices had brought a terrible divine vengeance...and that the repetition of such ‘offenses against nature’ had from time to time provoked similar visitations of divine wrath in the form of earthquakes, floods...etc.” (McNeil, 42) In looking at the actual biblical narrative of Genesis 18-19, one can see that it was denial of the divine value of hospitality that caused God to punish Sodom rather than any homosexual desires on the part of its residents.

It was not until centuries after the first readers of Genesis 19 that Church tradition developed a connection between homosexuality and the story of Sodom, a decision that would affect ideas about homosexual behavior in such a profoundly negative way as to associate the city with homosexuality from the beginning. In the Hebrew Bible, Sodom is referenced in the apocryphal text the Wisdom of Solomon. This passage states “There had been others [Sodomites] who refused to welcome strangers when they came to them...There is indeed a judgment awaiting those who treated foreigners as enemies,” (Wisdom of Solomon 19:13) emphasizing the xenophobic quality of the Sodomites. Jesus himself only references the sin of Sodom while criticizing the inhospitable reception of his disciples, stating “Sodom will fare better than that town” (Luke 10:10) to emphasize the importance of this value. Nissinen cites the first instances of the story’s reinterpretation to be during the Hellenistic age, with writers like the historian Josephus and the philosopher Philo of Alexandria emphasizing the sexual aspect of the tale, using knowledge of pederastic behavior from their own context to do so. (Nissinen, 93) While the tragic consequences over generations of such a misinterpretation cannot be reversed, revisiting the story of Sodom and Gomorrah with a

better understanding of its historical context can help reduce ignorance regarding the true meaning of the tale. In order to gain a better insight for what ultimately motivated biblical authors to have the Lord demolish Sodom, Judges 19 serves to illuminate many of the important contextual issues in the narrative because of the many literary features it shares with Genesis 19. A close reading of both texts illuminates the biblical authors' anxiety to maintain the values of a patriarchal society, negative attitudes towards xenophobia, and above all the value of hospitality as paramount to ancient near Eastern culture.

Genesis 18-19 tells the story of God's destruction of Sodom after the city demonstrates disturbingly sinful behavior to the angels of the Lord. After learning of the many wrongs that Sodom was committing (which are not specifically identified to the reader), the Lord pronounces judgment on the city and decides to share his plan with his faithful servant Abraham. Having just granted shelter to the Lord and his two messengers, Abraham is characterized as the epitome of hospitality in Genesis 18 as the scene contrasts his consistently humble attitude with the great lengths he goes to serving his guests. With a self-deprecating manner, Abraham begs the men "Let a little water be brought...let me fetch a morsel of bread..." (Genesis 18:4-5) but as soon as they accept he commands his wife for the choicest cakes and meat to offer his guests. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky explains, hospitality was valued as a result of the dangers of traveling in the ancient world, where the only deterrent against attacks on foreigners was the possibility of a vengeful descendent. Since the presence of foreigners often attracted major suspicion, elaborate codes of hospitality developed to prevent all-out war, but as Frymer-Kensky points out protocols depended on a common sense of trust that often didn't exist among different people. (Frymer-Kensky, 122) The grand gestures made by humble Abraham demonstrate him to be a model for the biblical value of hospitality and sets up the reader's outrage for the jarring contrast to come with the highly inhospitable behavior of the Sodomites.

Abraham's faithful dedication to the Lord and humble demeanor depict him as a foil for the weak character of Lot, a rhetorical strategy which will cause outrage in the reader once the immoral character of the Sodomites appears later in the narrative. Once the men leave and Abraham learns of the plan for Sodom's destruction, he begs God to

reconsider a sweeping damnation of all the civilians and God eventually agrees to give the men within it one final test of their righteousness. In order to try and convince the Lord to further investigate the sinfulness of Sodom so that innocent men may be spared, Abraham demonstrates an interesting strategy, appearing as humble as possible while at the same time boldly haggling further when the Lord seems to give way. As he repeatedly begs “Oh, do not let the lord be angry if I speak” (Genesis 18:30, 18:31, 18:32) he eventually convinces the Lord that if he finds ten righteous men in Sodom, he will spare the city of total destruction. Schwartz accurately comments this further characterizes Abraham as a heroic figure and calls him “one who deeply reveres God yet politely demands justice from Him.” (Schwartz, 39) Abraham’s character functions as a foil for the character of Lot, who appears next in the narrative as hospitable to a degree, but overall too weak and self-interested to be truly righteous.

The significance of God’s decision to consider sparing the city if enough righteous men are found is revealed once two angels of the Lord are sent out to begin the investigation. The Sodomite Lot offers them shelter and attempts to extend himself to his guests, though not as enthusiastically as Abraham did – where Abraham “ran from the entrance of his tent to greet them,” (Genesis 18:2) Lot merely “rose to greet them,” (Genesis 19:1) beginning his characterization as a weaker version of God’s faithful servant. Soon after the guests dine with Lot, it is described “Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last men, surrounded the house.” (Genesis 19:4) By explicitly declaring that every single man in Sodom surrounded Lot’s house in an attempt to attack the strangers, the narrator recalls God’s earlier promise and emphasizes the depravity of the city – aside from Lot, there was not one righteous man to spare Sodom its fate. The explanation for God’s judgment against Sodom is clarified by the men’s next words as they state “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” (Genesis 19:5) A seemingly innocent request, the offense becomes clear in looking at the meaning of the word “know”, which in the biblical sense had a sexual connotation. As Nissinen explains, the verb is used throughout the Yahwist’s texts to refer to intercourse, such as in Genesis 4:1 - “Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain.” (Nissinen, 46) The sexual aspect of the men’s attempt is further emphasized when Lot attempts to offer his daughters as a substitute, saying they have not “known”

men, or are still virgins. The angels then blind the attackers and reveal themselves to Lot, informing him to gather his family and flee before the impending destruction of the city. The weakness of Lot's character is further demonstrated by his inability to convince his sons-in-law of any danger, as it is described "He seemed to his sons-in-law as one who jests." (Genesis 19:14) Were it not for the Lord's mercy, Lot's weakness would have resulted in his destruction, since he is selfish enough to ask the Lord if he can flee to a closer town instead (Genesis 20). Unfortunately, Lot's luck runs out soon after he escapes the devastation, for not only is his wife turned into a pillar of salt after she looks back on her city, but he receives the justice for offering his two daughters up to the gang rapists. The elder daughter reasons, "Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father." (Genesis 19:32) Believing that the entire world population was destroyed along with Sodom, and thus any prospects of theirs to bear children, Lot's daughters intoxicate and rape him in order to get pregnant. The idea of preserving the family name by sleeping with their father is somewhat tragic, especially since only the cities of the plain were destroyed, but in a way Lot's daughters' actions are justified because he is guilty of offering them up for rape earlier in the narrative. As a result of Lot's daughters' actions, the story of Sodom is reverted and ends with a heterosexual rape rather than a homosexual one.

A careful reading of Genesis 18-19 leads one to question whether Sodom's offense had more to do with a demonstration of its xenophobia and pride through outward sexual threats. The biblical audience would not have had a conception of homosexuality as an orientation and so would not have viewed the threats of the Sodomites as an expression of homosexual desires, since most people in the ancient world assumed a natural attraction to the opposite sex. Instead, the threat of homosexual violence would be seen as an attempt to undermine a foreign presence in the most humiliating way possible by demoting these travelers to a passive, feminine position through the act of rape. Harry A. Woggon explains "In the patriarchal structure of Jewish and early Christian society...homosexual acts were seen as degrading the dignity of the male...they viewed sodomy (anal intercourse) as an expression of scorn." (Woggon, 159) Using sexual violence as a tool for the demonstration of power in this case cannot be associated with homosexuality as such, especially since Lot's daughters are offered as a substitute. As

Marti Nissinen writes, “[Lot] considers hospitality so sacred that he was willing to sacrifice even his daughters’ virginity for the sake of his guests.” (Nissinen, 46) The main issue that a biblical audience would have taken offense to is the complete dismissal of the sacred value of hospitality, which the Sodomites rejected in favor of a demonstration of xenophobia. The depraved motivations of the men of Sodom are demonstrated in declaring of Lot “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” (Genesis 19:9) Not only did none of the Sodomites offer the angels of the Lord shelter (Lot doesn’t count since he technically was not from Sodom), they openly threatened to attack them because of their status as foreigners. Lot being himself a resident alien doesn’t help the situation either, since the Sodomites could have viewed his reception of the foreigners as exceeding his rights or even a collaborative act of aggression. As Nissinen states “The men were motivated not to satisfy their sexual lust but to show their supremacy and power over the guests-and ultimately over Lot himself, a resident alien to whom a lesson was to be taught about the place of a foreigner in the city of Sodom.” (Nissinen, 49) By re-considering the motivations of the Sodomites, the reader understands their attempt to demonstrate power over foreigners through humiliating rape and the story can no longer be seen as a biblical condemnation of homosexuality. In attempting to understand the cultural context in which Genesis 18-19 was being read, one can realize the implications of Sodom’s rejection of a value that was paramount in ancient Near Eastern society – hospitality. While contemporary readers often define the sin of Sodom as homosexuality, a closer look at the text signifies that to make this unconscious association is to misinterpret the motivations of the author.

Comparing the story of Sodom to Judges 19, it is evident that their shared literary features function to emphasize the significance of the hospitality value in an ancient Near Eastern context. The collection of stories in the Hebrew Bible titled Judges are meant to demonstrate the problems a lack of centralized authority in Israel presents to society, one of which will be not having a king to ensure social norms like the value of hospitality are upheld. The bad behavior demonstrated by the figures in Judges is meant to reveal the demoralization of a society without a central figure governing the land and sets the reader up to accept the monarchy presented next in Kings. The central characters in Judges 19 are an unnamed Levite and his *pilegesh*, a lesser form of wife or concubine,

whose lack of distinct identity shows the biblical characterization of them as identifies as representations of society rather than individuals. Additionally, the wife's secondary status as a *pilegesh* put her in a position of subordination to her husband even greater than that of a typical marriage, which comes to be significant later in the narrative. (Frymer-Kensky, 118) Levites were honored for their position as cultic officers, but had no land of their own and so depended on the support of others. (Frymer-Kensky, 119) After a dispute, the Levite seeks out to get his concubine back from her father's house, and while his father-in-law is hospitable to the point where they stay almost too long, he does not encounter such goodwill once they depart for home. In a strikingly similar style to Genesis 19, the Levite and his concubine struggle to find shelter in Gibeah until one man offers to take them in. Biblical readers would have been outraged at the Levite's statement "Nobody has offered to take me in," (Judges 19:18) which is repeated from line 15 ("No one took them in to spend the night") to foreshadow that the breakdown of the obligation of hospitality will occur as in Genesis 19. Significantly, the host is technically from Ephraim, just as Lot was an alien residing in Sodom, leading to the same potential assumption by the Benjaminites that the foreigners were collaborating in some suspicious way. Xenophobic attitudes poison the Benjaminites against the Levite and his foreign host, demonstrating their inhospitable behavior as a negative consequence of the lack of central authority to ensure moral conduct in Israel.

The similarities between the Sodom narrative and Judges 19 continue when the men of the city surround the house and demand "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him." (Judges 19:22) The host again offers his virgin daughter as supplication for the mob, but this time the guest decides to take action to save himself – "The man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning." (Judges 19:25) As Frymer-Kensky illustrates, the Ephraimite is able to evade the outrageous social sin that is attacking a guest by offering up the least significant member of the household – the concubine was technically not his guest, but a member of his guest's entourage according to patriarchal notions of women, and so the men are able to save themselves. (Frymer-Kensky, 125) The concubine dies as a result of the aggressive Benjaminites, and as a result the Levite seeks revenge by gathering the

support of the other Israelite tribes in war against Gibeah. Conveniently neglecting to leave out his role in offering her up to save himself, the Levite sends an aggressive message to the twelve tribes of Israel by sending each a part of her body that he dismembered, a dramatic act that had never “been seen from the day the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt to this day.” (Judges 19:30) Explaining the motivation for such a graphic act, Freymer-Kensky writes, “Feeling himself abused, the man now abuses his concubine’s corpse and uses it to inscribe and dramatize his message. Her torn body is a symbol of the torn shreds of the social fabric.” (Freymer-Kensky, 128) In the absence of a central authority to govern Israel, the moral fabric of society has been destroyed and civil war is the result. Without a king, the tribe of Benjamin is concerned with its own sovereignty and separates itself – just as the Benjaminites originally reacted to the foreigner guests with hostility, the Israelites now unite against the separation of Benjamin with aggression, and with no central authority to prevent it civil war erupts.

Based on the clear parallels between the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and Levite’s concubine, one can assume that this was a literary genre that was well understood among biblical readers. However, the homosexual aspect present in each story would not have been the audience’s focus – outrage would have been demonstrated at the offensive behavior towards guests when hospitality was a moral norm, and concerned with the xenophobic behavior displayed by the foreigners. Nissinen writes, “The story of the fate of the Levite’s wife is itself an additional example of how the Sodomites’ xenophobic offense against the honor of a male guest and his host has been interpreted. The men of Gibeah are represented as ‘homosexuals’ no more than the men of Sodom.” (Nissinen, 50) The many literary similarities to Genesis 18-19 in Judges 19 serve to emphasize the true significance of both stories as examples of the misuse of hospitality by xenophobic individuals. The biblical authors of Judges demonstrate a rhetorical strategy that mobilizes the reader against the outrages a lack of central authority brings, using the characters of the Levite and his concubine as representations for a society rendered immoral without a king to rule.

By looking at the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and the Levite’s concubine in context, one can see the text

cannot function as a condemnation of homosexuality – biblical authors used the example of homosexual rape not as an expression of the offender’s identities, but of their wish to exert domination over foreigners through the humiliation of sexual violence. As Freymer-Kensky states “The purpose of rape is neither enjoyment nor love [but] the assertion of dominance and the dishonoring of the man forced to submit.” (Freymer-Kensky, 124) At this point it is clear how unnecessary a role the story of Sodom and Gomorrah has played throughout the history of homosexual condemnation. The biblical audience did not view the stories of Genesis 19 and Judges 19 as concerned with homosexuality but instead as a representation of the importance of hospitality and the dangers that result from xenophobic attitudes. In both cases, the emphasis is not on the implied sex act demanded of the guests but the denial of their right to a hospitable reception and the humiliation that would result. If hospitality is still valued in the Christian tradition as greatly as it was to the biblical audience, it is the Christian duty to be hospitable to homosexuals despite, and perhaps even because of, their presence on the fringes of the community.

Chapter 3: Reconciling the Writings of Paul with the Issue of Homosexuality

The writings of St. Paul have been deeply influential throughout the history of Christianity, impacting views of the faithful on subjects ranging from marriage to the role of government in society. Significantly, neither the most important figure in Christianity nor the stories written about his life say a word regarding homosexuality in the New Testament. There are no explicit references to same sex acts, homosexuality as an identity, or homosexual love by Jesus or anyone else in the Gospels, and yet many are quick to cite the New Testament when arguing against homosexuality based the writings of Paul. Regarding the debate on homosexuality and the Bible, Paul's epistles are often looked to for a definitively negative position on the issue, and while it is obvious Paul did not approve of homosexual behavior, this was not his main concern in writing to these early Mediterranean churches. While writing letters guiding various churches along the path of righteousness, Paul of Tarsus was unaware that his epistles would develop into doctrine that would deeply influence Christianity, and least of all aware that they would shape opinion on contemporary issues thousands of years later. His intention was to guide these problematic churches back to the path of righteousness, for most of these early Christian communities were made up of Gentiles who had not yet fully let go of their old pagan practices. Paul utilizes a complicated rhetorical argument in order to demonstrate the supremacy of idolatry as the most grievous sin and the necessity of Jesus' grace to overcome it and in doing so identifies a number of behaviors as manifestations of depravity. Among the Pauline epistles, there are three statements relating to homoerotic acts that have been used for the condemnation of the homosexual identity, despite Paul living in a radically different time with a special set of concerns motivating his arguments. To interpret these passages in such a definitively negative way is problematic because the text is confusing and sparse by nature, and a great amount of misunderstanding results from the ambiguity of Paul's language. In order to avoid the negative attitude that comes from such a misinterpretation, it becomes necessary to look closely at both the translation of Paul's words and his motivations in writing

the letters to these various early churches.

Just as the authors of the Old Testament passages we encountered lacked a true conception of homosexual orientation, so it is with Paul and his statements in the New Testament – the biblical author was not wrestling with the issue of homosexuality as an identity because such a conception simply didn't exist during his time. As already seen from the late invention of the term “homosexual” and its concept as an identity, Paul's statements regarding homoerotic behavior cannot be read as a condemnation of the homosexual orientation in general. If not the act of love being homosexuals, what kind of sexual activity was Paul referencing, and what was his motivation for including such a condemnation as part of his general argument? In addressing early churches that seemed unclear on Jesus' message, Paul needed a powerful argument that would clarify misunderstandings about the gospel and promote faith in the one Jesus Christ. Romans 1:18 is the beginning of Paul's case to emphasize justification through faith, which saves both Jews and Gentiles from a common problem – idolatry. Although Paul cites homosexual behavior as a manifestation of immorality, it is not homosexuality as such that is sinful but the physically sexual behavior that is just one illustration of humanity's greatest problem – lack of faith in Jesus Christ. Lacking a conception of homosexuality as an identity, it is the physical act of homoeroticism Paul condemns, following a line of other depraved behaviors that also include heterosexual promiscuity. To single out homosexuality as the chief concern of Paul's diatribe would be to make the same mistake one does in characterizing the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as the punishment of a homosexually depraved city.

Paul's ultimate goal was to argue that Jesus' gospel treats problems common to both Jews and Gentiles, but in Romans 1:18 it seems he attempts to fire up a Jewish audience by indicting the latter pagan group for refusing to see the light of Christ. Paul writes “Ever since the creation of the world his

eternal power and divine nature...have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse.” (Romans 1:19-20) According to Paul, God’s power has been clear to the Gentiles for some time now and so they have no explanation for refusing to honor Him, which justifies the unleashing of divine wrath against them. Paul next launches into his criticism of pagan worship of idolatry, which violates the first commandment and causes an angry divine reaction. After the pagans “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images” (a clear definition of idolatry by Paul), God “gave them up to degrading passions...Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men...” (Romans 1:26-27) This key passage clarifies that moral confusions follow from the practice of idolatry – rather than God unleashing his wrath as a result of the immoral sexual behavior, the “unnatural” sexual activity is a result of God’s anger.

Paul’s Jewish background functions as a source of great influence for him as an author, with his knowledge of the H source in Leviticus guiding his writing significantly in Romans. The Holiness Code had originally connected idolatry and homosexual practices in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, as we saw the writers warn the Israelites against the idolatrous behavior of their pagan neighbors. Writing from this Jewish background, Paul deals with the issue of homosexuality strictly within the context of this issue of idol worship. Essentially, the practice of idolatry is the cardinal sin that causes God to give up on these people – sexual immoralities proceed from God’s anger and subsequent rejection, rather than cause it. Nissinen writes “The first chapters of Paul’s letter to the Romans, then, address the theology of justification by faith, not homoeroticism...The deeds he mentions are not provocations of the wrath of God but manifestations, symptoms and results of the one root sin, exchanging God for idols...” (Nissinen, 112) Paul’s reference to homoerotic behavior simply functions as part of the demonstration that the pagan world’s root problem is idolatry, where the only solution is justification

through faith, and therefore the reference cannot stand on its own as an attack on homosexuality.

Stating that men and women exchanged natural relations for unnatural also raises the question of what Paul means by “unnatural” – rather than condemning homosexuality as abnormal and wrong, it seems he is talking about heterosexuals who are engaging in homoerotic behavior. According to Nissinen’s translation from the original Greek, “*para physin*” literally means “against nature”, but this is not nature as one conceives from the modern view of genetics or biology. Nissinen writes “In antiquity, *physis* expresses a fundamental cultural rule or a conventional, proper, or inborn character or appearance...Accordingly, ‘unnatural’ is a synonym for ‘unconventional’.” (Nissinen, 105) Rather than understanding Paul’s words as aimed at what we would conceive as homosexuals, based on this translation it seems he is talking about people acting out against their natural heterosexual disposition through homoerotic acts since he assumes these natural roles. The problem with men and women acting out in such a way recalls what we have seen earlier in studying the Old Testament and the cultural context of antiquity – to go against one’s gender role disrupts the entire social order of biblical culture and so was strictly judged by both Paul and his contemporaries. This kind of behavior was shameful not because these people were expressing their true orientation as homosexuals but because they were committing sexual acts against their nature as heterosexuals. An understanding of the word “unnatural” as an unconventional reversal of gender roles becomes clear from Paul’s initial mention of the women committing these transgressions – choosing to put the women first in his critique is a demonstration that their rebellious behavior was the most offensive to him. Loughlin writes “As with the men, the unbridled lust of these women leads them to adopt the contrary of their natural sexual role, and censure falls on those women who wish to be active rather than passive, as it falls on those men who wish to be passive rather than active.” (Loughlin, 92) As previously discussed, men who assumed a passive role during homoerotic sex reduced their social standing by overthrowing patriarchal norms that promoted a dominant male role, and so performance of these acts was shameful. However, for Paul even more

disgraceful than men assuming a passive sexual role was same sex acts between women, since these involved a woman assuming an active and traditionally male dominant role, which in a patriarchal society would have been the greatest transgression. Reading Leviticus and living in the ancient world, Paul critiques the men and women's voluntary rejection of their traditional gender roles based on his Jewish and Hellenistic background. The severity of assuming nontraditional gender roles through homoerotic acts cannot be overstated from Paul's perspective. Nissinen writes "For Paul, same-sex relations are not a matter of personal identity, but they certainly are a matter of accepted gender roles, the confusing of which, for him, is 'against nature.'" (Nissinen, 113) Since Paul had no conception of homosexuality as an orientation, it could not have been this he opposed. Instead, it is heterosexuals voluntarily acting against their gender roles through homoerotic acts that he condemns, which he has already cited as a direct result of the divine reaction against idolatry.

Paul's rhetorical strategy continues to develop with the following passage, a list of vices that was a common literary feature in the ancient world and would have been especially recognizable to Jewish readers. The vice list in Romans progresses from wickedness to ruthlessness, all abominations which proceed from the primary sin of idolatry in a style that Jewish readers would associate with Gentiles – to truly emphasize his point Paul ends by saying that even the Jews have no call to judge since they too are just as sinful. Nissinen explains "Paul's rhetorical strategy in Romans 1-2 seems to be to stimulate his readers' moral indignation by listing sins traditionally associated with Gentiles, in conventional Jewish wordings...[he] turns the force of his criticism against his potential readers." (Nissinen, 111) A shift in perspective regarding Paul's motivation for writing Romans leads to the understanding that the condemnation of homosexuality is of no concern to the writer. Paul promotes the doctrine of justification by faith through a critique of idolatry, a sin which leads to a host of other wrongs which can no longer be simply applied to the pagans – both Jews and Gentiles are in need of this gospel. His rhetorical strategy clearly illustrates a concern for the theology of justification by faith,

not homosexuality - homoerotic behavior is an example of the moral confusion which proceeds from idolatry, the use of which calls the attention of a reader living in a patriarchal society where gender roles are paramount. In addition, the main goal of Paul's argument is evident from his inclusion of other sins – homosexuality is never explicitly singled out, but included alongside additional sinful acts that include heterosexual behaviors like promiscuity and prostitution. It was not simply homoerotic sex acts that Paul opposed, but all sexual behaviors that were not sanctified by marriage, including heterosexual acts.

1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 are two further writings attributed to Paul which share controversial statements related to homosexuality, primarily related to their usage of the words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. These two terms are ambiguous at best and extremely negative at worst, and throughout history their mistranslation has led to inappropriately negative ideas about the biblical portrayal of homosexuality. In 1 Corinthians 6:9, Paul declares “Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites....none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10) Of first concern is the translation of “male prostitutes” from *malakoi*, which Nissinen explains comes from the Greek word for “soft” – relating to weakness of body, character, or morality, in the ancient world the word was often used in a negative connotation to describe an overly effeminate man. (Nissinen, 117) Robin Scroggs describes his idea of the word *malakos* as signifying a kind of “effeminate call boy”, or a free youth who sold himself for the purpose of sexual gratification in contrast to a sex slave or the noble youth involved in the typical pederastic relationship of the Hellenistic world. (Scroggs, 106) The feminine association may link it to homosexuality, but it was clearly used in other contexts as well – Nissinen refers to a papyrus letter from 245 BCE which speaks of an Egyptian musician with the nickname *malakos*, who is described to have an effeminate appearance but without any sexual reference. (Nissinen, 117) Scroggs writes “Malakos was not a technical term referring to pederasty, but could refer to a quality of life style which some people associated with pederastic practices.” (Scroggs,

63) Based on this association, a biblical audience would have rejected such behavior based on the term's link to the potentially abusive practice of pederasty as well as the effeminate connotation.

“Sodomites” here is translated from the Greek *arsenokoitai*, but as this vague term appears for the first time here in Paul, it is unclear what he actually intended to mean by it and certainly a leap to assume the eternal damnation of homosexuals. While most scholars dispute the authorship of 1 Timothy by Paul, the word *arsenokoitai* also appears here and is used as part of a vice list to explain the value of the law – “The law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful...for murderers, fornicators, sodomites...” (1 Timothy 1:9-10) Nissinen discusses the etymology of the Greek word by breaking it up into prefix and suffix - “arsen” refers to man and “koite” to bed, the latter of which clearly gives the word a sexual connotation. To further demonstrate the sexual context of the word, both 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Timothy 1:10 texts have *arsenokoitai* preceded by fornicators. Although the word evidently is related to a sexual act, it is difficult to conceive whether the male, *arsen*, is the one performing the act or the subject of it. According to Nissinen "It is difficult to determine whether it means a man who lies (exclusively) with men ('one who lies with men,' with *arsen* as object), or a male who can lie with both women and men ('a male who lies', with *arsen* a subject)." (Nissinen, 115) The juxtaposition of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* has the potential to refer to the passive and active roles in a pederastic male relationship, but based on the ambiguity of the terms this is clearly far too narrow an interpretation. As McNeil describes, there was no word in biblical or classical Greek to denote a homosexual as we would conceive of one today, but there were several words for a person who engaged in same sex activity – for example, *paiderastes*, *pallakos*, and *kinaidos*. (McNeil, 52) Based on the availability of these terms, it is conceivable to believe Paul would have used one of them if the issue he wished to debate were that of general homosexuality as such. The problematic nature of interpreting *arsenokoitai* suggests that we may never know whether Paul was referring to a male prostitute or a pederastic relationship, but one

thing is clear - he could not have been referring to people with a homosexual orientation since such an idea is a wholly modern conception.

As Scroggs points out, these lists of vices are significant as forms of a popular rhetorical device in the ancient world where the author strung together a list of sinful habits and attitudes in order to create an impression on the reader. The vice list helps to answer the question of how important homosexuality as an issue was to Paul based on how it functioned as a popular literary form – the significance of the list was understood to be found not in the specific items it cited, but its general length and the presence of the list itself. Scroggs describes “What is clear is that the users or creators of these lists do not carefully select the individual items to fit the context with which they are dealing...What was important was the list as the list, and perhaps its length...the items might well be partially memorized from a traditional stock of evils.” (Scroggs, 102) Clearly the presence of ambiguous terms linked to homoeroticism in such a standard literary device does not ultimately make homosexuality the main issue of these texts. As much as Paul opposed homosexual acts, there were generally no sex acts he did approve of. To cite Paul as a source for opposition against homosexuality is to misinterpret both the culture he lived in, which lacked a modern notion of sexual identity, as well as his motivations for writing the epistles, in which his primary goal was espousing a doctrine of justification by faith.

Contemporary readers may never completely understand what Paul and his biblical contemporaries meant by the few ambiguous references to homosexuality in the New Testament. Recognizing the potential impossibility of this issue, it is necessary for Christian readers to focus on a much more feasible goal - identifying the general themes of love, justice and sexual morality present throughout the Bible. By focusing on this identification of biblical values, it becomes clear that Christianity supports any loving and equal relationship despite the sex of its members. Keeping in mind

that moral wrong can be committed in a relationship even between two married heterosexuals, one must evaluate Christian sexual relationships based on criteria that goes beyond gender and focuses on Christian social values such as the presence of love and respect. Instead of focusing on the ambivalence of a few negative passages, it is much more valuable for Christian readers to look to the greater message of love visible in the entire Bible, and by doing so it becomes not only possible but necessary to justify homosexual relationships from a Christian perspective.

Chapter 4: Using the Christian Social Ethic to Justify the Rights of Homosexual Christians

As necessary as it is to contextualize the biblical passages referencing certain forms of homosexual practice in the ancient world, ultimately the Christian value system takes precedence over these few questionable statements. Rather than drawing on a limited amount of ambiguous and negative passages, one must instead look to the positive values of love and justice present throughout the Bible in order to make a decision on the morality of homosexuality from an informed Christian perspective. The Biblical texts which speak about forms of homoerotic behavior come from a place of ignorance about what it means to identify as a homosexual and more importantly reference physical sex acts that are committed out of violent and lustful motivations, most often when dealing with greater theological issues of moral corruption and idolatry. Since the passages do not reference a true understanding of the love between two homosexual persons, it is impossible to use them to justify condemnation of the entire homosexual community. As a Christian, one is morally obligated to appeal to the love commandment and the value for justice rather than these negative and ambiguous statements. In order to determine whether or not a homosexual relationship is morally just, a Christian must evaluate it just as one would any heterosexual relationship – based on the presence of values such as mutual love and respect. By considering homosexuality from a Christian perspective, emphasis on the love ethic and justice for the oppressed based on Jesus' message prove most useful in its moral justification. If the goal of a Christian's life on earth is the fulfillment of personhood, then the expression of a homosexual identity through a loving homosexual relationship is clearly both morally acceptable and necessary if the alternative is a denial of their basic self.

Opponents of homosexuality often appeal to the natural law ethic, citing God's complementary creation of man and woman in Genesis 1 as indicative that any other pairing is a perversion of the natural order of things. While God did create Eve as man's first partner, his reason for doing so is of

much greater significance than her being a woman or her ability to bear children – instead, Eve is created because God realized that it was not good for Adam to be alone. In Genesis 2, God presents Eve as a companion for the first man on earth – “I will make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18) - and it is this primary function that helps refute the natural law argument against homosexuality. If the ultimate goal of human sexuality is to fulfill the need for human companionship, then it does not necessarily matter whether that companion is of the same sex or the opposite because procreation is a secondary value. In his discussion of the Genesis narrative, Jay Michaelson writes “This story is about loneliness and love, not procreation and progeny...Eve’s femininity is not even essential for her to be...with Adam on equal terms and be a companion to him” (Michaelson, 11) From this perspective, the argument that homosexual Christians should deny their desire to be together because they are not members of the opposite sex is senseless. Michaelson continues “If Genesis is any guide, and if our conscience is any guide, then we must see that having people in love with one another...is religiously preferable to its absence.” (Michaelson, 12) The fundamental Christian value evident in Genesis is the necessity of loving human companionship, and thus a homosexual relationship constitutes a fulfillment of this value if the alternative is remaining alone. Frank Kirkpatrick further explains “If it is assumed...that it cannot be in accord with the divine intention for the created order for men to desire other men in the context of a loving lifelong relationship, the homosexual acts must be regarded as intrinsically wrong.” (Kirkpatrick, 154) The key phrase in this statement is the reference to a loving and lifelong relationship – to make the assumption that the divine intention is against such a relationship between two men must be wrong if one understands the created order of things to be between two companions that are not necessarily man and woman. As long as people are fulfilling their nature to desire companionship through a positive sexual relationship, it does not matter if they are homosexuals because this constitutes flourishing and expression of their nature.

The idea of fulfillment through companionship thus can be seen as the primary theme of Genesis, but the procreative command of Genesis need not necessarily conflict with it and consequently deny homosexual their rights. The reproductive technologies of today's world mean even two men or two women are able to have children together if such procreation constitutes their flourishing as a Christian couple. One must also question whether or not the procreative command is still paramount in an overpopulated world, since producing children may be ethically questionable in dealing with the limited amount of resources such a world leaves us with, and in this case adoption can be the most ethical and viable option for homosexual Christians. If one takes Genesis as a warning against human solitude rather than a promotion of the procreative aspect between a man and a woman, the natural law perspective no longer functions as an argument against homosexuality. Companionship is sacred and holy so long as the relationship meets the Christian ethical criteria of mutual love and respect.

Jesus may not have made any explicit statements regarding homosexuality, but it is impossible to ignore his promotion of the Christian love ethic throughout the Gospels – most importantly, his commandment to “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” (Matthew 22:37) This fundamental message must inform all Christian decisions, especially those regarding the judgment of others. As Michaelson states “Compassion rejects the imposition of my preconceptions onto other people, and invites a willingness to reexamine those preconceptions in light of what the other reveals to me...to rise above one's own preferences, with patience and loving-kindness, to truly see from the perspective of the other.” (Michaelson, 26) The love of one's neighbor means the rejection of prejudice and the requirement of compassion even (and perhaps especially) towards people with very different lifestyles, which in this case includes homosexuals. To judge homosexuality as morally wrong because it is different from the norm is to deny the Golden Rule and the most fundamental teachings of Christianity's leader. From the perspective of the Christian love ethic, what is uncommon or different is not to be judged negatively

but instead must be viewed with the compassion and respect a Christian gives to all people. A Christian relationship therefore must not be preemptively judged simply by the sex of the participants but evaluated on the basis of whether such a relationship fulfills the biblical love commandment. Identifying such a criteria for judgment, Nissinen writes “Suppression, violence, infidelity, and exploitation, on one hand, and love, responsibility, and empathy, on the other, are the criteria for evaluating any sexual practice.” (Nissinen, 127) It is important to note that heterosexuality is judged throughout the Bible on the basis of these criteria as well where heterosexual practices are condemned for being lustful and adulterous, stemming from the seventh commandment “You shall not commit adultery.” (Exodus 20:14) The important distinction is not to single out same sex practices for being immoral as such, but to evaluate the relationship between homosexual persons from a Christian ethical perspective in this way, determining whether or not the fulfillment of whole personhood is accomplished through mutual love and respect. A sexual relationship that does not accomplish this goal but instead is based on violence, lust or disrespect is thus immoral regardless of the sex of the participants.

The significance of the Golden Rule is not only its demand that Christians love and respect from one another despite their differences, but also that Biblical passages which emphasize love must always take precedence over those that do not. The Golden Rule necessitates the promotion of love in all cases, which means that Scripture must be interpreted on a positive basis and renders the negative passages regarding homosexuality irrelevant. According to Michaelson, “In religious contexts, love tilts the balance in favor of those readings that engender more love, more holiness, and more justice.” (Michaelson, 28) He goes on to cite examples of how Jesus disregarded biblical rules such as healing a person on the Sabbath and eating with those who had not properly washed (Luke 13:10, Mark 7:1), actions which are technically clear violations of the Jewish law but were intentionally ignored because the motivation for doing so was based on the love commandment. Love and compassion for others

supersedes the Jewish law in this context, a notion which can be applied to the issue of those texts which negatively reference homosexuality. If the laws of the Holiness codes are to be taken literally, Leviticus 20 means that men who engage in sexual relations with other men must be punished with the death penalty, which is clearly not a reading which promotes a Christian love ethic in fulfillment of Jesus' commandment to love thy neighbor. The Golden Rule necessitates that Christians instead must interpret this from a standpoint of love, and if Leviticus 20 can't be interpreted allegorically as "an eye for an eye" was, then it must be disregarded.

Just as Christian readers once used biblical passages as a justification for slavery and took its literal word as proof that the sun rotated around the earth, interpretations of certain texts must change over time to deal with contemporary realities. Nissinen writes "Questions about same-sex relationships are asked very differently today compared with the world in which the Bible was written, and the correlation of these two contexts is often superficial at best. It may well be...that we have to diverge from the 'clear word' of the Bible...Changes in worldview have forced people to adjust even to things and views that appear contrary to the Bible." (Nissinen, 126) Clearly most Christians today would not attempt to justify slavery based on the passages in Leviticus that reference it, and so we can only hope that soon enough using these texts as a condemnation of homosexuality will be just as ludicrous. Recognizing the radically different historical context of the writers of Leviticus is important, but just as necessary is using the Christian love ethic to determine the value of these passages. If interpreting Leviticus 18-20 results in a negative formulation against homosexual Christians that only serves to hurt their fulfillment and self-expression, the passage must necessarily be disregarded. Michaelson writes "These few verses are far less important than the hundreds of verses and insights of conscience about the holiness of love, or human dignity, or honesty, or justice." (Michaelson, 56) Understanding that these narrow interpretations of the Jewish law are subject to change is only part of the movement

toward reconciling homosexuality with biblical texts - recognizing that they must do so if Christians are to remain faithful to Jesus' message is paramount.

The promotion of homosexual rights based on a Christian social ethic is further supported by the biblical value of justice. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus was clearly devoted to bringing his message to the oppressed members of his society and emphasized that these ostracized people were the ones most in need of the Holy Spirit. By ridding his followers of distinctions and stereotypes that they held before coming to Christianity, Jesus promoted equality as a religious mandate that can be applied today to homosexual Christians. Michaelson cites the experience of the Israelites and the biblical command to never forget God's release from this oppression, stating "The biblical command to do justice merges with the mandate to feel empathy. We are called upon to remember what it is like to be oppressed, and to try to get to know the group that is being disfavored...it is precisely when a majority of people have a certain view that protection of minorities is most necessary." (Michaelson, 49) If one applies the analogy of the Israelites to an oppressed minority today, homosexuals who are struggling to gain equal rights while maintaining their Christian identity clearly represent the sort of group that requires empathetic attention. Jesus identified himself with minorities and denied differences that made his followers unfavorable members of society, and homosexual Christians are a perfect contemporary example for the application of the justice value. Gerard Loughlin states "If we believe that God can set all our cherished distinctions at nought...then we can also believe that God can...undo even the distinction between gay and straight...[The Bible] tells us of a God who in Jesus goes out to all those who are feared and despised so as to bring them into a radical *koinonia* of mutual subordinations." (Loughlin, 101) Jesus calls for all people to become equally a part of the Holy Spirit despite prior distinctions, as well as proclaiming justice for the oppressed in remembrance of the Israelite struggle against the Egyptians. Viewing homosexual Christians as a contemporary example of an oppressed minority necessitates their support in light of Jesus' ministry to the marginalized members of society.

In order to fully honor Jesus' message Christians must reconcile homosexuality with the Bible and grant homosexual Christians equal rights. To deny homosexuals a Christian identity is to ignore the biblical values of love and justice and choose a sparse few ambiguously negative texts over the greater, positive biblical commandment to love another. So long as Christians understand their flourishing as an expression of their sexual identity through a loving and mutually respectful relationship, such a relationship is justified through a Christian social ethic regardless of whether or not it is of the homosexual or heterosexual variety.

Conclusion: The Final Say

In discussing the biblical texts which reference certain forms of homosexuality and the writers' motivations for their treatment of the issue, it becomes clear that these texts are sparse, ambiguous and altogether do not serve to negatively decide the issue of the Bible's view on homosexuality. To use these passages to define Christianity's perspective on the issue would be to disregard rhetorical strategies, historical and cultural contexts, and a system of positive biblical values which transcend the negativity in these texts. Biblical writers speak of same-sex practice from a place of ignorance about what it means to identify as a homosexual, without a true conception of sexual orientation. These authors were also dealing with much greater issues than the morality of homoerotic behavior, and were not focused on reconciling this issue in their writings. Instead, these passages demonstrate anxieties about how the Israelites would come to identify themselves, concern for gender roles and purity, the importance of hospitality codes in the ancient world, and finally the problem of idolatry. All these issues are often the main focus behind ambiguous passages relating to homosexual behavior, and minor references to same-sex practice can thus be seen as part of a much greater rhetorical strategy where the morality of homosexuality is not the main concern whatsoever. The misinterpretation of biblical texts related to the issue of homosexuality must end if Christians are to base their opinions on the Bible. The primacy of the issue in the news and politics makes solving the problem of misinterpretation all the more necessary, for a Supreme Court ruling will definitively decide gay marriage as soon as June 2013 for better or worse. If Christians are looking to the Bible as a source of authority on the issue of homosexuality, it is necessary to truly understand what exactly these biblical authors said about the issue, and realize that homosexuality as an orientation was not treated negatively. Instead of focusing on a small set of ambiguous passages, Christians must look to the biblical values of love and justice to make an informed decision regarding the morality of a homosexual relationship. All Christian relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual, must be evaluated by the same criteria – if such a relationship

demonstrates equality, mutual love and respect between the partners, it is justified from a Christian perspective. A true understanding of rhetorical strategy and historical context behind certain biblical passages as well as the Christian social ethic in general lead to the reconciliation of the Bible with the issue of homosexuality.

Works Cited

Berlin, Adele, Marc Zvi. Brettler, and Michael A. Fishbane. *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva Simone. *Reading the Women of the Bible*. New York: Schocken, 2002. Ebrary, Inc. Web. 4 Dec. 2012. <<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/trinity/Doc?id=10056677>>.

Kirkpatrick, Frank G. *The Episcopal Church in Crisis: How Sex, the Bible, and Authority are Dividing the Faithful*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008. Print.

Loughlin, Gerard. "Pauline Conversations: Rereading Romans 1 in Christ." *Theology and Sexuality* 11.1 (2004): 72-102. Print.

McNeill, John J. *The Church and the Homosexual*. Kansas City, KS: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1976. Print.

Mears, Bill. "Supreme Court Takes Up Same-Sex Marriage." *CNN* 7 Dec. 2012. 1. Web. 10 December 2012

Michaelson, Jay. *God vs. Gay?: The Religious Case for Equality*. Boston: Beacon, 2011. Print.

Nazworth, Napp. "Poll: Religion, Bible Most Often Cited Reasons for Opposing Gay Marriage." *Christian Post Reporter* 6 Dec. 2012: 1. Web. 10 December 2012

Nissinen, Martti. *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*. Minneapolis, MN:

Fortress, 1998. Print.

Roth, Martha Tobi., Harry A. Hoffner, and Piotr Michalowski. *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1995. ACLS Humanities Ebook. Web. 4 Dec. 2012. <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.07775>>.

Scroggs, Robin. *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1983. Print.

Siker, Jeffrey S. *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/J. Knox, 1994. Print.

Woggon, Harry A. "A Biblical and Historical Study of Homosexuality." *Journal of Religion and Health* 20.2 (1981): 156-63. *JSTOR*. Web. 27 Sept. 2012. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27505623>>.